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ABSTRACT

Three different socioeconomic groups of mothers were studied to determine the similarities and differences of their responses to typical behaviors of their children, aged one to four, in order to gain insight into differences in the socialization process. The three groups were: (1) black, low-income, inner-city mothers of 35 children (Group I); (2) white, upper middle-class, suburban mothers of 26 children (Group II); and (3) mothers of 14 children, whose background was blue-collar and of recent European origin (Group III). The mothers participating in the study were individually interviewed with the Implicit Parental Learning Scale (IPLET). Mothers were asked to respond to 45 items of behavior, typical for a child's age and asked to indicate whether she would encourage or discourage the behavior or whether the behavior would make no difference to her, and then to indicate what she could actually do in response to the behavior. Analysis of maternal responses indicated that many encouraging, supportive responses were common across all classes. The differences among the three groups in maternal styles of teaching were summarized by characterizing the modes of response of Group I as physical, in Group II as cognitive, and in Group III as emotional. To help clarify the meaning of the differences in patterns, the life circumstances of each group are compared. (CS)

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SOCIOECONOMIC DIFFERENCES IN MATERNAL RESPONSES TO YOUNG CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

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Socioeconomic Differences in Maternal Responses to Young Children's Behavior

The period between the ages of one and five years have rightfully been considered a crucial developmental period in the life of the individual, since an intensive process of socialization is taking place, mainly within the context of the mother-child relationship. Children of all social classes go through a similar developmental sequence of behavior in this period. However, norms and values associated with socioeconomic class and ethnicity are potential factors which would make for differential responses on the part of mothers in relation to similar behavior on the part of the children. Although the socialization process in the young child has some goals in common across all classes, differences in some of the goals, or in the mode of maternal teaching for attainment of the goals, may have important implications for the child's future cognitive and personality development.

The present research is concerned with studying, in mothers of three different socioeconomic groups, the similarities and differences of their responses to typical behaviors of their children aged one to four, in order to gain insight into differences in the socialization process.

The groups studied were black, low-income, inner-city mothers of 35 children (Group I), white, upper middle-class, suburban mothers of 26 children (Group II), and mothers of 14 children, whose background was blue-collar and of recent European origin (Group III).

The mothers in Groups I and III were parent participants in child care centers; the mothers in Group II were involved as volunteers in social service work.

The mothers participating in the study were individually interviewed with the Implicit Parental Learning Scale (IPLET), developed by Caldwell, Honig, and Mozell (1967). The mother is presented with 45 items of behavior, typical for the age of the child, and is asked to indicate whether she would encourage or discourage the behavior or whether the behavior would make no difference to her, and then to indicate what she could actually do in response to the behavior.

The typical child behaviors which are presented to the mother can be classified into the follwoing categories: (1) behaviors which show age-appropriate progress towards socialization; (2) age-appropriate behaviors which may cause minor annoyance to the mother; (3) behaviors which indicate resistance to socialization; (4) behaviors which conform to sex-role expectations; (5) behaviors which show age-appropriate fear or distress; (6) behaviors which show some physical regression; (7) behaviors which show some emotional regression; (8) behaviors showing age-appropriate aggressive responses to provocation; (9) age-appropriate exhibitionistic behaviors; (10) behaviors which pose a threat to the child's safety; (11) behaviors which are destructive of enviromental objects; (12) behaviors which indicate affection towards others.

The mother's specific responses to the child's behavior are scored on the basis of 26 categories, which fall into three major classifications: (1) manipulation of enviromental events, which includes such responses as provision or deprivation of privileges and tangibles, provision of

substitutive reinforcement, circumvention of behavior, utilization of the natural consequences of an act, positive physical responses, and negative responses involving mild or severe physical punishment; (2) manipulation of communication on emotional-verbal level, which includes such responses as promises of provision of, or threats of deprivation of, positive emotional responses, severe verbal reproaches, threats of physical punishment, verbal commands, verbal indications of cultural norms, and higher level cognitive teaching; and (3) absence of maternal response, including ignoring, lack of response when the child attempts to elicit one, or non-intervention in a situation regardless of whether the mother wishes to encourage or discourage the behavior. The scoring system thus makes possible a rather complex and detailed analysis of the strategies which a mother uses in responding to the range of positive and negative behaviors of the child as he goes through the normal process of physical, emotional, and social maturation.

However, the set of maternal responses can also be fitted into the framework of a simpler system of analysis, such as Schaefer's (1958) Circumplex Model of Behavior, which orders maternal behavior along two orthogonal dimensions of love versus hostility, and autonomy versus control. This provides four quadrants, representing: (1) loving acceptance with autonomy; (2) hostility with indifference and detachment; (3) hostility with authoritarium control; and (4) love with overprotectiveness and inability to treat the child as a differentiated individual.

Analysis of the responses of the three groups of mothers indicated that many encouraging, supportive responses to the child's manifestation

of physical, emotional, and social maturation were common across all classes.

Group I mothers, compared with Group II mothers, began an active socialization process earlier and more strictly. A few examples will illustrate this. In response to their one year old child "showing off" when other adults are around, the suburban group indicated that they would make no response to this behavior, or would distract the child verbally, or would give a positive verbal response. On the other hand, the inner-city mothers indicated they would respond to this behavior with severe physical punishment, deprivation of privileges, or verbal commands to stop the behavior. The response by the suburban group to a one year old child who splashes in the toilet bowl water was mainly by circumvention of the behavior, while the inner-city group responded mainly with mild or severe punishment. The one year old child who sleeps with the light on brought no maternal response from the suburban group, but met with a negative response in the form of deprivation of privileges in many mothers in the inner-city group. The one year old who grabs toys from other children was responded to by most of the suburban group by a simple command to stop or by ignoring of the behavior, while the inner-city group more frequently indicated a more active negative response in the form of deprivation of privileges and intangibles.

Comparing the responses of these two groups to their two year old child, the child who wets the bed at night brought mainly no response from the suburban group, but was responded to with mainly negative responses by the inner-city group, including high intensity commands, severe verbal reproaches, and severe physical punishment. The two year

old child who sometimes handles his genitals was mainly ignored by the suburban group, but was responded to more actively by the inner-city group, mainly by attempting to teach the child cultural norms or by commands of mild intensity to stop the behavior. Stuttering or stammering in the two year old child was responded to by the suburban group mainly by ignoring, while the inner-city group responded mainly by simple commands to stop. The two year old who turns the TV switch on and off while the family is watching was responded to by the suburban group mainly by explanation, simple commands to stop, or deprivation of privileges and tangibles. The inner-city group responded to this behavior mainly by mild or severe physical punishment.

At age three the child who sucks his thumb was responded to by the suburban group mainly by ignoring the behavior, but was responded to by the inner-city group mainly by negative responses, including simple commands to stop, mild expressions of disapproval, and mild physical punishment. The three year old who talks back to his mother was responded to by the suburban group by telling the child it was wrong, showing disapproval, a simple command to stop, or by ignoring the behavior. The inner-city group responded mainly by severe physical punishment.

The four year old child who talked back to his mother was responded to in a variety of ways by the suburban group, including expressing mild disapproval, telling the child it was wrong, providing explanations, mild or intense commands to stop, or ignoring the behavior. The inner-city group responded mainly by severe physical punishment. Stuttering or stammering in the four year old child was responded to by the suburban group mainly by ignoring the behavior; the inner-city group responded

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mainly by cognitive explanation. The four year old child who occasionally wets his pants during the day was responded to by the suburban group mainly by ignoring the behavior. The inner-city group responded mainly by telling the child not to do it or by severe physical punishment. The four year old who interrupts while adults are talking was responded to by the suburban group mainly by explanation. The inner-city group responded mainly by telling the child to stop. The four year old who gets cranky when he has to wait for food was responded to by the suburban group mainly by providing the child with substitute satisfaction or verbal reassurance. The inner-city group responded mainly by telling the child to stop the behavior or ignoring the behavior.

Group III ranked midway between Groups I and II in the use of physical punishment. However, Group III differed from both Groups I and II in their greater use of both positive and negative emotional and verbal responses to the child's behavior, in the use of active deprivation of privileges and intangibles as a means of controlling the child's behavior, as well as in the greater use of a lack of response to the child's behavior. The differences among the three groups in the maternal styles of teaching can be succinctly summarized by characterizing the emphasis in modes of response of Group I as physical, in Group II as cognitive, and in Group III as emotional.

A comparision of the life circumstances, particularly between Groups I and II, helps to clarify the meaning of the differences in patterns. The black, inner-city mothers were almost all rearing their children in fatherless households, on a grossly inadequate welfare allowance, with little hope for amelioration in the future. Under such harsh circumstances infancy is a luxury which can be afforded for only a brief period. The child must grow

up quickly in order to allow attention to be given to the younger sibling. In a fatherless household with several small children, the mother's role of necessity takes on the aspects of strictness and control. Control over her children's behavior while they are young is probably the only area of her life where this mother can exercise some degree of power.

Group III mothers, as members of a proud ethnic group, somewhat economically and educationally disadvantaged, which has been attempting to maintain its neighborhood and identity from encroachment by the larger community, relied upon a heavier use of emotional techniques, as well as more concrete rewards and deprivations, to influence the child's behavior and incidentally reinforce the intergenerational ties which have enabled members of this ethnic group to maintain its identity.

Group II mothers showed a greater utilization of options and alternative ways of responding to the child's behavior. This pattern of responses can be seen as reflecting a way of life and standard of living which offers options and alternatives not possible for those living under disadvantaged circumstances. The more leisurely pace of growing up for the child, together with a stimulating, responsive environment and the use of a more elaborate linguistic code (Bernstein, 1960), provide greater opportunity for the child to do the experimenting and exploration essential for the fullest development of cognitive abilities.

Each pattern of child-rearing can be viewed as having an adaptive function for the particular group. Nevertheless, adaptation in one area may be maladaptive in another area. The emphasis upon strictness and early independence training may help the inner-city child cope with the harshness of life in the ghetto, but the emphasis on conformity without reasoning or inquiry is unlikely to be helpful for the optimal development of his cognitive abilities. The emotional maternal style of the ethnic group may provide

control in the child's early years, but may interfere with optimal emancipation from family ties later in the child's development. An even with the most advantaged group, the choices and alternatives offend to the young child may offer the most cognitive stimulation, but may provide a more precarious foundation for emotional security.

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